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ABSTRACT

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Running Head: EDUCATION DEANS' PRIOR'TIES

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1

Determining Education Deans' Priorities*

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Abstract

The academic deanship is among the least studied and most misunderstood positions in the academy. The purpose of this study was to identify the functions that experienced deans found most important. This survey of education deans employed a paired-comparison method. The survey was administered to all the deans/chairs of education who were members of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE). The survey was e-mailed to 564 deans and chairs. The usable return rate was 29.0%. Deans selected the most important tasks from 20 dean tasks identified in the literature. The most important tasks were promoting quality teaching, hiring strong faculty, and developing effective partnerships with schools. The least important tasks were keeping central administration well informed, promoting staff development, and remaining current in his/her own discipline. Deans indicated that it was more important to work well with their faculty than with those in central administration.

Determining Education Deans' Priorities

Introduction

The academic deanship is the least studied and most misunderstood position in the academy. Relatively little is known about those who lead and support colleges (Gmelch, Wolverton, and Wolverton, 1999).

The job of the education dean is extremely complicated. As Gardner (1992) said:

> University administrators find education schools harder to comprehend than other professional schools; they appear untidy in their organization, overextended in programs, and much too diverse (even schizoid) in their mission. The teacher education function is the most easily recognized aspect of ed schools, but it is by no means their sole activity. Thus, ed school deans face the constant problem of having to explain what their colleges do, why they do these things rather than others, how these activities are consistent with the overall mission of the university, and the social significance of their efforts. (p. 357)

Some have viewed the dean as a *dove* of peace who intervenes among warring factions that cause destructive turbulence in the college. Others have viewed the dean as a *dragon* driving away internal or external forces that threaten the college. Still others consider the dean as a *diplomat,* guiding and encouraging people who live and work in the college (Tucker and Bryan, 1988). The job of deans of education appears to have undergone a transformation with more emphasis placed on extramural funding, personnel decision-making, and alumni relations (Gmelch, Wolverton, and Wolverton, 1999).

Gardner (1992), sharing observations from 15 years as an education dean, pointed out that the major dilemma faced by education school deans and faculties is how to resolve the confusion over mission—should education schools emphasize teacher and administration education missions to the detriment and perhaps the exclusion of the graduate and research missions? Gardner identified four activities that belong on a dean's "To Do" list as: (a) educating faculty and central administration, (b) compiling data, (c) building a development fund, and (d) hiring faculty.

Gardner explained that vice presidents need coaching and that a dean is wise to look for new and better ways to impress and inform people who are busy and who are not terribly interested in the subject matter. Although faculty members are not uninterested in what deans and central officers talk about, those topics are of peripheral interest. But a dean risks failure unless support of the faculty is maintained. The dean must also have a data collection and analysis system. Examples of important data are cost of instruction comparisons with other academic units, faculty-student and faculty-staff ratios, student characteristics, degree completions, and the amount of money generated through external grants and contracts. In addition, since state allocations do not keep up with internal needs, the dean needs ingenuity in acquiring funds. Finally, Gardner indicated that hiring faculty should be the single most important activity on a dean's "To Do" list. Efforts invested in hiring can pay dividends later.

How do education deans characterize their leadership style? Gmelch, Wolverton, and Wolverton (1999) found that, in rank order, the ten statements that most characterized their leadership behaviors were: (1) keep promises, (2) treat others with respect regardless of position, (3) can be relied on, (4) follow through on commitments, (5) share power and influence with others, (6) oriented toward action rather than status quo, (7) involve others in new ideas and

projects, (8) act on the principle that one person can make a difference, (9) respect people's differences, and (10) encourage others to share their ideas for the future. The deans reported that their most important tasks, in rank order, were:

1. Maintain conducive work climate
2. Foster good teaching
3. Represent college to administration
4. Recruit and select chairs and faculty
5. Maintain effective communication across departments
6. Financial planning and budget preparation
7. Encourage professional development of chairs, faculty and staff
8. Evaluate chair and faculty performance
9. Communicate mission to employees and constituents
10. Develop long range college goals

While commenting on surviving the deanship, Bruess (1999) divided factors that promote survival into four categories: (a) with school of education administrators, (b) with faculty, (c) with the provost and/or president, and (d) with yourself. Three examples from each category are:

a. It is crucial to appoint good administrators, effective delegation is a must, and effective communication must be promoted and modeled.
b. It is important to respect and work with faculty committees, faculty input must be constantly sought, and data (including budget) must be openly shared.
c. The dean should be a good team player and understand the context of the overall university, must warn central administrators about potential problems that might be

big or in which they have a particular interest, and keep central administrators informed about the bigger issues.

d. Be willing to accept and make tough decisions, manage time effectively and efficiently, and take care of yourself.

The purpose of this study was to identify the tasks that experienced deans found most important.

Method

The current study employed a survey of education deans that used a paired-comparison method (Kerlinger, 1973) administered over the Internet. The population, sample, survey instrument, data collection methods, and analysis procedures are described in this section. The Kerlinger text provides an excellent overview of paired-comparison methodology. A more in-depth treatment can be found in Fox (1969) and a complete theoretical description of the method and analyses can be found in Torgerson (1958). Those wishing to explore some of the historical issues relating to the development of the method are directed to Ross (1934) and Wherry (1938).

Population and Sample

The survey population included all the deans of schools/colleges of education or chairs of education divisions in the USA (n = 564) who were members of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE). The survey was sent via e-mail to all 564 deans and chairs whose e-mail addresses were provided by AACTE. Of the 564 e-mails that were sent, 36 were returned with errors noted in the e-mail addresses. After six weeks, 163 surveys were returned. Of the 163 surveys that were returned, 10 included missing data and were eliminated from the analyses (the paired-comparison technique requires completed data). Assuming that 528 were actually delivered, the return rate was 30.9% and the usable return rate was 29.0%. At least 10 others responded by e-mail that they were not completing the survey for a variety of

reasons ranging from they were no longer a dean to they did not have the time to complete it.

Instrumentation

As previously noted, the survey used a paired-comparison method. The survey instrument included 20 tasks that most deans are expected to perform. The tasks were draw from an extensive review of the professional literature. Each task was paired with each other task. The respondents were asked to select the most important task from each pair. Thus, respondents were asked to select the most important task form each of the 190 pairs of tasks. They also responded to two demographic items—the highest degree offer by their school and the number of teacher education graduates per year.

As noted, the tasks were based on a review of the literature. Several experts including current and former education deans as well as a measurement specialist reviewed a draft of the survey. The instrument was pilot tested with a small group of experts before distribution. The pilot test suggested that it took between 10 and 15 minutes to complete the survey.

Data Collection

The survey was conducted on the Internet with the deans being contacted via their e-mail addresses. A survey web page was constructed and published in a dedicated website (http://www.ed.uab.edu/cea/jmsurvey.htm) to distribute the survey. This method allowed the survey population of deans and chairs to respond on line. The web site was hosted on a secure server so the survey could be returned via the Internet anonymously. No identifier could be traced back to the survey participants since no password or login identification was required to access the survey.

Each dean or chair was contacted via e-mail. The e-mail message stated the purpose, the need, their rights, contact personnel information, the survey website address, and the directions

for completing and submitting the survey. A letter from David M. Imig, President of AACTE, supporting the study and encouraging deans and chairs to participate in the survey was also included. After one month, a follow-up e-mail message was sent out to each dean or chair reminding him or her of the survey request and thanking him or her if they had already responded. After each dean or chair completed the survey online and clicked the "Submit" button, a confirmation page of responses was forwarded to the researcher as an e-mail message through the server e-mailer cgi-bin function. A pencil coded survey ID number was added to the e-mail response to keep track of those that were returned.

Data Analysis

The data were entered on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and then verified. The percentage of time each task was chosen as most important over the other 19 tasks was computed using the Excel spreadsheet. Thus, for each respondent, a score for each task was computed representing the proportion of times that task was chosen as more important over each of the other 19 tasks. These results were imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for further analysis. Frequencies and percentages were computed for the two demographic items. For each of the 20 dean tasks, the mean percentage of times each task was selected over the other 19 tasks was computed along with its standard deviation.

Results

The results are presented in two parts. First a description of the respondents is presented followed by the results of the survey.

Description of the Respondents

Table 1 presents a summary of the survey population and sample including the number of deans or chairs with e-mail addresses, the number of e-mails actually delivered (not returned as undeliverable), and the number of usable surveys returned.

Please insert Table 1 about here.

Upon sending the e-mails, 36 were returned indicating that the e-mail addresses were not currently recognized by the system.

Table 2 provides a summary of the frequencies and percentages of the responses based on the highest degree offered by each school of education.

Please insert Table 2 about here.

The responses represent 153 different colleges, schools, or departments of education. Of these institutions, 16 (10.6%) offered only bachelor degrees, 70 (46.4%) offered through a masters or specialist degree, and 65 (43.0%) offered through the doctoral degree (Ed.D/Ph.D). Two of the respondents omitted this item.

The size of the colleges and schools of education is depicted in Figure 1. Of the

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respondents, 6 (4.0%) schools graduated less than 50 undergraduate and graduate students per year, 13 (8.6%) schools graduated between 51 and 100 students per year, 40 (26.5%) schools graduated between 101 and 250 students per year, 40 (26.5%) schools graduated between 251

and 500 students per year, and 52 (34.4%) schools more than 500 students each year. Two respondents omitted this item.

The Importance of Dean Tasks

The mean percentage of times that a task performed by education deans was more important than the other 19 tasks was determined by averaging the percentages for that task across the results of the 153 respondents. Table 3 lists these tasks from the "most important" to the "least important." The standard deviation for each of these tasks is also provided.

Please insert Table 3 about here.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although the return rate for this study was relatively small (about 30%), it is in line with expectations for this type of study. In fact, the usable sample size (153) is quite respectable considering the population for the study. Based on the demographics, there was not reason to believe that there was a bias in the returns with respect to degrees offered and size of the teacher education program.

The paired comparison method forces each respondent to chose between each pair of tasks. Many times, this means choosing one task between two desirable tasks. The result is list of tasks ranked according to importance. The average percentage each task was ranked more important than others represents an approximate interval scale score that can be used to compare the relative importance of each task. As noted, these results can be found in Table 3 where the 20 dean tasks are ranked and the average percentages approximate interval scale scores. It is conceivable, for example, that a respondent might feel that all 20 tasks are important, but the paired-comparison method would force him/her to rank some tasks as more or less important

than other tasks. Even though this may happen, it is interesting to observe the relationships among the dean tasks.

Teaching is the clear priority of these deans (with a scale score of 77.0). Wondering if this would hold for deans at doctoral-granting institutions, we re-ran the data for only the doctoral institutions and the first four priorities were the same. Thus, teaching was also a clear winner for deans at doctoral institutions (scaled score of 75.9).

It is common to talk about faculty roles making up a three-legged stool with the legs being teaching, scholarly activity, and service. While promoting quality teaching was rated as the top priority for education deans in this study, promoting quality scholarly activity was 6th (scale score of 51.0) and promoting quality professional service was 15th (scale score of 39.6). According to these deans, the three-legged stool is not a balanced one. The differences are even more pronounced when the scale scores are considered (77.0 vs. 51.0 and 39.6 with standard deviations of approximately 23-25 scale score points).

On the average, at least 50% of the deans ranked the following tasks higher than the others: Promoting quality teaching, hiring quality faculty, developing effective partnerships, effective strategic planning and goal setting, seeking faculty input, and promoting quality scholarly activity. Personal goals such as maintaining one's own scholarship and remaining current in one's own discipline were quite low on the list. In fact, the only task lower than these two was good relations with alumni (scale score of 12.5). This may be the result of practical considerations since deans and chairs might argue that their administrative duties keep them so busy that there is not enough time left for their own faculty-type activities. It might also be because they are evaluated totally as administrators and not as faculty members; therefore, it would not be profitable to continue their own faculty-type activities.

Hiring good faculty (scale score of 73.5) and developing effective partnerships with schools and community (scale score of 66.8) were also very high on the list ranking 2nd and 3rd. Apparently the deans recognized the importance of having strong faculty working with them as recommended by Gardner (1992). It is interesting to note, however, that while developing effective partnerships with schools and community was rated very high (3rd on list with a scale score of 66.8), promoting quality professional service was rated quite low (15th on list with a scale score of 39.6). While there can be multiple reasons for effective partnerships, it would seem that developing them would require the promotion of quality professional service at the same time.

Items related to faculty welfare were rated higher than keeping the central administration well informed. This result might help explain the relatively short tenure of many deans and chairs. Interestingly, compiling data to support decisions is rated relatively low (ranked 13th with a scale score of 41.9); yet such data are just what many central administrators expect a dean to provide. In addition, such data would be needed for effective strategic planning and goal setting that deans rated high (ranked 4th with a scale score of 61.9). Yet compiling data to support decisions was ranked only 13th in importance with a scale score of 41.8.

These deans ranked working with administrators in their units as only 14th in importance (scale score of 40.5). This seems strange since the relationships with those appointed by the dean and working closely on administrative matters are crucial for a dean's success. Input from faculty seemed to be valued by these deans and chairs. It was ranked 5th in importance with a scale score of 55.6.

Having good relations with alumni is very low among the deans' priorities. This task has the lowest scale score of only 12.5 and was ranked in last place (20th). In addition, the deans

and chairs agreed the most about its placement in that its scale score standard deviation was only 11.76 (by far, the lowest with the other standard deviations ranging from 19.95 to 49.85).

Judging from the responses of the 153 deans and chairs who responded to this survey, we drew the following conclusions:

1. The most important tasks for deans are promoting quality teaching, hiring strong faculty, developing effective partnerships with schools and community agencies, doing effective strategic planning/goal setting, seeking faculty input, and promoting quality scholarly activity (ranked 1st through 6th respectively).
2. Although faculty are usually expected to perform well in teaching, scholarly activity, and service, the deans and chairs seemed to promote teaching (ranked 1st) over scholarly activity (ranked 6th) and promoting service (ranked 15th).
3. Among a list of 20 administrative tasks, the least important ones seem to be keeping central administration well informed, promoting staff development, remaining current in his/her own discipline, maintaining personal scholarly activity, and having good relations with alumni (ranked 16th through 20th respectively).
4. Experienced deans seem to feel that it is more important to work well with the faculty in their own units than it is to work well with those in central administration.

The results of this study may be useful in a number of ways. First, it may inform currently practicing deans about possible inconsistencies in their behaviors or provide support for current practice. However, it is probably most useful to new deans who want to learn what tasks current deans value. In this way, it could become a valuable resource for new deans.

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Table 1

Summary of Surveys Sent and Returned

Item	Number	Percent of Total
Dean or Chairs with email addresses	564	100.0
E-mails Actually Delivered	528	93.6
Surveys Returned	163	30.9
Usable Surveys Returned	153	29.0

Table 2

Degrees offered by Schools/Colleges of Education

Degree	Responses	
	No.	%
Bachelors	16	10.6
Masters/Specialists	70	46.4
Doctoral	65	43.0

Table 3

Average Percentage of the Time Each Dean Task was Rated as More Important than the Other Tasks Listed from the Highest to the Lowest (n = 153)

Dean Tasks (in rank order of importance)	Percentage Highest (Scale Score)	Standard Deviation
1. Promote quality teaching	77.0	23.09
2. Hire strong faculty	73.5	23.09
3. Develop effective partnerships with schools and community agencies	66.8	24.35
4. Do effective strategic planning/goal setting	61.9	27.48
5. Seek faculty input	55.6	49.85
6. Promote quality scholarly activity	51.0	25.73
7. Hire strong staff	49.0	23.90
8. Promote his/her own health/stamina	48.8	36.48
9. Evaluate faculty and unit administrators	48.2	24.81
10. Promote faculty development	46.7	20.12
11. Keep faculty well informed	44.0	19.95
12. Be successful related to internal and external funding	41.9	22.66
13. Compile data to support decision	41.8	40.74
14. Work effectively with administrators in your unit	40.5	22.95
15. Promote quality professional service	39.6	22.83
16. Keep central administration well informed	34.7	23.09
17. Promote staff development	33.8	20.86
18. Remain current in his/her own discipline	31.5	30.45
19. Maintain personal scholarly activity	25.9	32.24
20. Have good relations with alumni	12.5	11.76

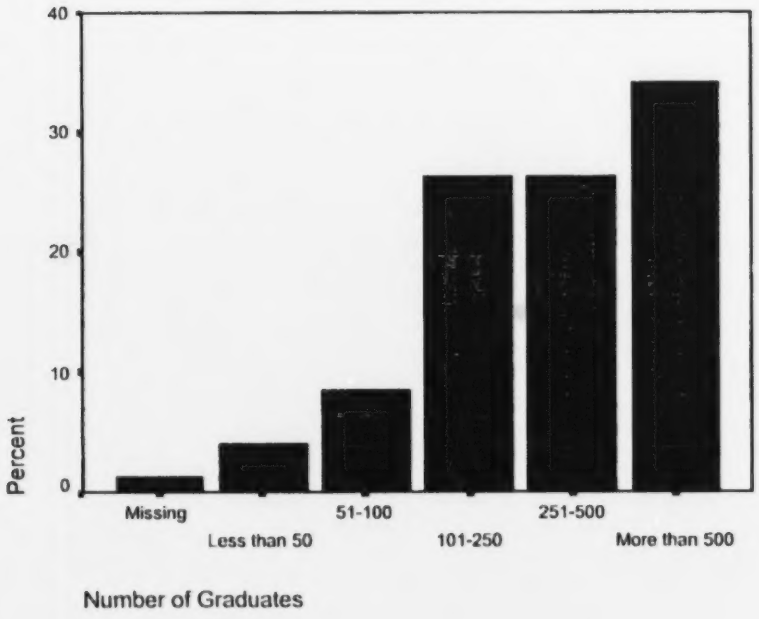

Figure 1. School Percentage of Students Graduated Per Year

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